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ABSTRACT

A major provision of the South Carolina Education Improvement Act of 1984 established the requirement for a high school exit examination (HSEE) for all 10th-grade students. Passage of the HSEE is a condition for the receipt of a state high school diploma. The HSEE is an outgrowth of the South Carolina Basic Skills Assessment Program, which mandated a state testing program to assess student mastery of mathematics, reading, and writing skills. The HSEE, which consists of three subtests (reading, writing, and mathematics), was pilot tested twice between 1985 and 1987. Tenth, 11th, and 12th graders and adult education students are administered the HSEE in the spring of each year. It is also administered each fall to all 12th graders and adult education students who have not passed one or more sections of the exam. Currently, 10th-grade students who fail any subtest must retake the subtest during the 11th grade and, if necessary, twice during the 12th grade. Students are allowed four attempts to pass all three subtests. For the class of 1990, 63% of the 40,399 10th graders who took the HSEE passed all three portions on their first attempt. By the end of the fourth administration, 1,999 students had still not passed the HSEE. In addition to other non-diploma options, remedial education is offered to those students who do not pass the exam. The cumulative passing rate of 94.5% for the class of 1990 exceeded the estimated cumulative passing rate for the pilot-test class of 1989, which was 85.9%. Surveys of students and the public indicate that students are properly informed of the testing requirements, and students and the public generally agree that the such an exam is appropriate. (TJH)

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PERSPECTIVES ON SOUTH CAROLINA EDUCATIONAL REFORM: THE EXIT EXAM

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PERSPECTIVES
ON SOUTH CAROLINA EDUCATIONAL REFORM

THE EXIT EXAM

DIVISION OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY
SOUTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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THE EXIT EXAM: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The teaching and testing of basic skills is generally accepted as the primary activity of public education in this country. In an effort to better equip South Carolina students with those basic skills necessary to prepare them for life beyond high school, a major provision of the Education Improvement Act of 1984 (EIA) aimed at strengthening the teaching and testing of basic skills. Specifically, this provision established the requirement for a high school exit examination. The law states, in part, ". . . the (State) Board (of Education) shall cause to be administered an exit examination to all tenth grade students. Passage of this exit exam is a condition for the receipt of a State High School Diploma for those students who otherwise meet the requirements for the diploma during the school year 1989-90 and thereafter."

The Exit Examination consists of three subtests on reading, writing, and mathematics, designed and developed to assess student progress.

Development of the exit exam began with the State Board of Education adoption of the South Carolina Basic Skills Assessment Program (BSAP) objectives as the basis for the examination. The BSAP objectives are the result of the 1979 Basic Skills Assessment Act, which mandated a state testing program to measure student mastery of certain skills against standards set specifically for South Carolina students. The primary purpose of BSAP is to identify deficiencies in mathematics, reading, and writing, so that the instruction of remedial students can then be aimed at overcoming these deficiencies.

During the school years 1981-1985, the BSAP examination was administered each year to all eleventh grade students. The results of these test administrations were used as baseline data for the development of the high school exit exam. The BSAP Exit Examination consists of three subtests on reading, writing, and mathematics, and was designed and developed to assess student progress in these areas.

Pilot testing of the exit exam began during the 1985-86 school year when it was administered only to tenth grade students. The second pilot test occurred in the spring of 1987 when the exam was administered to the tenth grade class of that year and to students from the previous pilot test who had failed to pass all sections of the exam. The development and pilot test phases of the exit exam included extensive reviews by review committees to ensure that the tests were based on learning objectives of the state's schools, that the tests were free of bias, and that questionable test items were filtered out.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EXIT EXAM

The exit exam is first given in the tenth grade, and students must pass all three sections of the exam to be eligible for graduation. Students are allowed four attempts to pass all three sections of the exam. Students who fail all or portions of the test in the tenth grade must retake those failed portions in the eleventh grade. Those students who do not pass the test in the eleventh grade have two opportunities to retake all or parts of the exam in the twelfth grade.

Tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders and adult education students are administered the exit exam in the spring of each year. It is also administered each fall to all twelfth grade and adult education students who have not passed one or more sections.

In keeping with the BSAP requirement to identify deficiencies in reading, writing, and mathematics and the EIA mandate to strengthen the teaching and testing of basic skills, remedial programs were established to assist students who fail the exit exam. Beginning in the tenth grade and thereafter, students who fail the exit exam are required, by law, to enroll in a remedial program. The purpose of the remedial program is to help students overcome deficiencies identified by the exit exam and to prepare them for retaking the exit exam.

To be eligible for graduation, students must pass the exit exam as well as earn a total of 20 academic credits.

Statewide implementation of the BSAP Exit Examination requirement occurred in the spring of 1988 for the students of the class of 1990 and all graduating classes thereafter. To be eligible for graduation, students must pass the exit exam as well as earn a total of 20 academic credits, as required by law. For the 1989-90 school year and thereafter, individuals participating in adult education programs must pass the exit exam as an additional requirement for the receipt of a State High School Diploma.

EXIT EXAM RESULTS

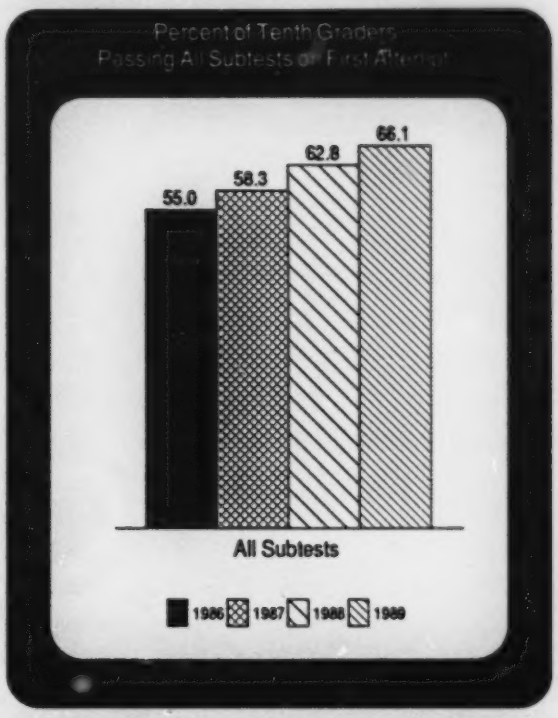
Approximately 63% of the 40,399 tenth graders (Class of 1990) taking the exam passed all three sections on their first attempt. This pass rate for all sections on the first attempt was a noticeable improvement over the first-attempt passing rates on the two pilot tests of the exam. The percentage of students meeting the standard for each of the subtests also increased. In reading, 78.0% of the students tested for the first time met the standard; 77.6% met the math standard; and 78.9% met the writing standard.

Of the 40,399 students in the Class of 1990, about 14,498 students made their second attempt as eleventh-grade students.

The spring 1989 administration of the exam to 38,390 tenth-grade first-time examinees (Class of 1991) showed a continuing trend of improvement in the percentage of students passing all subtests and meeting the standards. On this administration, 66.1% passed all three sections. Students meeting the reading standard increased to 83.6%; 81.4% met the standard in math; and 79.1% met the writing standard.

The third attempt at passing the exit exam for the Class of 1990 came in the fall of 1989 when the exam was administered to twelfth graders only. A total of 7,139 twelfth graders took the test with 3,097 successfully completing the exam. These results raised the passing percentage of students in the Class of 1990 to approximately 89% of the class. The remaining 4,042 students who did not successfully complete the exam had to pass one or more portions of the exam to meet the diploma requirement. These students made their fourth attempt at passing the exit exam in the spring of 1990.

On the spring 1990 administration of the exam to the Class of 1990, a total of 3,998 twelfth graders took the examination. This administration was the fourth attempt for members of this



graduating class. Of the 3,998 examinees, 1,999 successfully completed the examination and 1,999 must still pass one or more portions of the exam to meet the diploma requirement. As of August 1990, approximately 95% of the class of 1990 has successfully completed all portions of the exit exam. The remaining 5% of this class

must decide upon one of the three options available to students who do not complete this graduation requirement. Students who do not pass the exit exam but otherwise meet graduation requirements may elect to (1) receive a South Carolina High School Certificate, which indicates the number of credits earned and the grades completed, (2) receive a South Carolina High School Certificate, enroll in an adult education program, and take the exit exam through that program, or (3) continue to enroll in high school and receive remedial help until they pass the exit exam (up to the age of 21).

PUBLIC, PARENTAL, AND STUDENT OPINIONS ABOUT THE EXIT EXAM

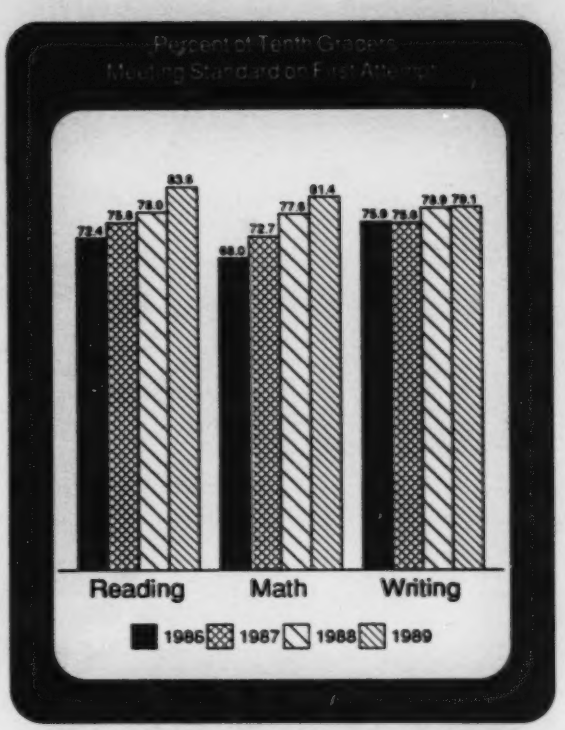
Throughout its process of education reform, South Carolina has sought the opinion of two of the reform's primary beneficiaries, the public school student and the general public. These two vital constituents have composed the survey population for many opinion questions during the life of the Education Improvement Act (EIA) of 1984. The following information was compiled from responses of students and the public to questions concerning the high school exit exam.

In response to expressed concerns as to whether students directly affected by the exam were aware of the requirement, a 1987 statewide survey of eighth-grade students (class of 1991) showed that fewer than 1% of the students surveyed reported not knowing about the test. Of those polled, 72% said they had learned about the test from their school. Public school parents and teachers and the public (with no ties to the schools) were asked for opinions on the exit exam. The requirement of an exit exam

Approximately 95% of the class of 1990 has successfully completed all portions of the exit exam.

for a high school diploma drew support from more than 85% of each of the groups surveyed.

In the 1989 Student Opinion Survey, South Carolina students (eleventh and eighth graders) were asked whether or not requiring the exit exam for graduation was a good idea. Sixty-three percent of the students polled agreed



with the requirement. Students also were asked if the exit exam forced them to pay more attention to their studies. Approximately 68% of the respondents answered affirmatively, indicating that they believed that most students felt more compelled to study because of the exam. Just over 63% of the students understood that a poor performance on the exam could keep them from obtaining a diploma.

These findings indicate that there is a high level of awareness and receptiveness on the part of students and the general public with regard to the exit exam requirement. In a 1990 public and parent opinion poll being conducted within the state by the Gallup Organization, the public and parents are again being asked if they support the exit exam as a requirement for obtaining a high school diploma. This will be the first reading of public and parent opinion on the exit exam following the graduation of the first class (1990) to be affected by this requirement.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Implementation Status

The BSAP Exit Examination was pilot tested and implemented on schedule in accordance with EIA requirements. The standards for student achievement have been established, and required remedial programs are in place to assist students in achieving the standards.

Indicators for Programmatic Change

Results of implementation of the exit exam to date have yielded positive results with regard to the pass/failure rate of students taking the exam. The cumulative pass rate of 94.5% for the Class of 1990 exceeded the estimated cumulative passing rate for the pilot-test Class of 1989, which was 85.9%. It appears that students are accepting the program and doing quite well in meeting the exit exam requirement. However, this process does not leave those students who do not pass the exam by their senior year forgotten. Research is being conducted by the Division of Public Accountability into the demographic characteristics of the population not passing the exit exam. These results will be utilized to address the needs of this group and to develop profiles which will permit early identification of students who may have difficulty passing the exit exam. Test results also have indicated the writing portion of the exit exam produces the highest failure rates. Both of these issues warrant a more concentrated effort on the part of educators to determine what changes need to be implemented to strengthen the teaching and mastery of basic skills to these groups of students.

Indications for Program Continuance

Pilot-test findings and implementation results show that the exit exam program can be accomplished as required. The high approval rate (85%) of parents, teachers, students, and the public indicate that South Carolina citizens support the exit exam as a tool of reform. These facts, along with the commitment of the South Carolina Legislature to improve education for the state's children, ensure that the exit exam has permanence in South Carolina.

The Division of Public Accountability, by law, is responsible for monitoring and reviewing programs developed under the Education Improvement Act of 1984 and providing an annual assessment of the Act. For each of the past five years, the Division has annually produced an assessment report, entitled *What is the penny buying for South Carolina?* The document has become increasingly voluminous and complex as data have been gathered over time. Cumulative data—in education as in any field—are necessary for identifying and analyzing trends. In order to keep the assessment report focused on the larger picture, the Division is implementing a new approach to the presentation of detailed information by introducing a series of special reports, which will complement and supplement the annual assessment report.

The special reports will be designed to be read in a relatively short period of time and will be released periodically throughout the year as data become available. Each report will focus on a single issue related to the education reform initiatives of the Palmetto State. They will be targeted primarily to the general reader and will be presented from a "lay" perspective.

This document, which addresses the issue of the South Carolina high school exit examination, is the first such special report prepared by the Division of Public Accountability.